

Financial Services Joint Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations and Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity Hearing on Mold: a growing problem

July 18, 2002; 2:00 p.m.; 2128 Rayburn

In the preparation for this hearing I have spoken to many of my friends and colleagues about the issue of mold damage in commercial and private properties and reports of adverse health effects. While there are many who are aware of the seriousness of this issue there are also many who are unaware of the growing scope of this problem. In an effort to increase all of our knowledge Chairwoman Roukema, Ranking Members Gutierrez, Frank and I have agreed to hold this joint hearing.

In my view, one issue with is the lack of scientific evidence as to the direct correlation between mold damage and adverse health effects. Because of this uncertainty homeowners fear grows without any definitive evidence of what ““safe or potentially dangerous”” levels of mold may be.

In addition, the uncertainty of this issue has created a window of opportunity for unethical lawyers and contractors to prey upon vulnerable populations. As evidence, without objection, I’m going to make a part of the record a copy of a May 17 New York Post article entitled ““Costly Lawyer Cashes in on ‘Mold; Money.’” This article tells the story of lawyer who settled a class action lawsuit for \$1.7 million, taking more that half of the money for himself and left the families with an average of one thousand dollars each. The part of the article that alarmed me the most was this — quote ““The money he offered me wasn’t even enough to buy a decent tombstone for my daughter,”” said 81 year-old Mattie Quailey, whose daughter, Lorraine Woods, 58 died in 1998 from alleged prolonged exposure to molds.....”” — end quote.

All of us need to step back and look at the facts surrounding this issue, and do so in a coordinated manner. The witnesses we have here at the table today represent a broad cross-section of the interested parties in the mold debate. By working together, I hope we will be able to find some answers in an area where there are still large numbers of unanswered questions.

Let me state unequivocally that all of us have great sympathy for those who are suffering health problems of any kind, no matter what the cause. I would personally urge property owners to do everything they can to protect their investments - and most importantly, their families — from mold infestation.

At the same time, this Congress must assess the true nature of the mold issue before rushing into legislative action. In the process of preparing for this hearing, my staff interviewed numerous medical experts who emphasized that mold simply cannot be directly linked to so many of the serious medical conditions for which it has been blamed. There are many other causes that can be cited for the symptoms people blame on mold: hypersensitivity, allergies, viruses, and deficiencies of the immune system.

As we will hear this afternoon, the Centers for Disease Control is currently working with other institutions to study this issue and provide more information on the true health effects of mold infestation. It is imperative that we look to the nations medical research institutions to help us separate legitimate claims from what some have termed “mold hysteria.” Ultimately, we are going to need better scientific standards and safety education to help consumers and industry identify legitimate dangers to immediately begin compensation and remediation.

We are holding this hearing to help us separate the facts from the myths surrounding the recent dramatic rise in mold claims and its reported catastrophic effects. While many Americans are unaware of potential dangers from untreated mold growth in commercial and private properties, the lack of scientific standards and documentation only adds to the confusion we all feel when confronted by potential dangers of substances we grew up to believe were harmless.